NO ONE IS HURT FOREVER

by

Lane Kerr

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of
The Consolidated University of North Carolina
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

1953

Approved by

Lettie H. Rogers
Adviser

INTRODUCTION

Many events take place during a person's life that will always have a particular influence on him. Some of these are humorous, some tragic, others "disturbing." Some are never able to be completely defined by the person to whom they occur. It is a paradox that an outsider often formulates a clearer picture of a writer who attempts to put some of these events onto paper than the writer himself.

All this is by way of saying that the following four stories are based on personal experiences. This, of course, may or may not be recognized by those who read them, but this admission will refute those who say, "What does he know about a monastery?" for I was in one. The other stories are also extremely personal.

Some readers might feel that one point of view throughout the thesis would have served, in order to better centralize the stories. I agree. But I add that I would not have been able to accomplish something I felt was necessary in my own development: the idea of experimentation, of studying different points of view.

The second story, "A Flag For a Soldier," was the first to be written, and, now that I look back on the over-all work, by far the easiest to write. However, that story was the one I had concentrated on for more than three years and it was a simple process to transmit the action from the mind to paper.

This story places Brad Townsend, at eighteen, on board a ship where he experiences death. Death is not completely personal, but its impression on Townsend is important. In the war setting, it is the very

absence of violence that is telling. In tone this story is more objective than the others. Dialogue and fairly flat bits of description are asked to carry the burden of the story. No mind is probed.

"Only Old People Die" was written next and the small child was originally named Tommy. Something was wrong. Re-writing did not solve the problem until I changed his name to Brad. Then I felt that I had my story. It was at this point that I decided to use the same character throughout all the stories, for I realized how essentially autobiographical the material was.

I worked on the last two stories more or less simultaneously. For me, they represent experiments in the sub-conscious and involved a lengthy probing into Brad Townsend's mind. This is also true in the case of the first story, "Only Old People Die." Perhaps, in the manner of "A Flag For a Soldier," these other stories ("No Balloons in the Sky," "Only Old People Die," and "Wash Your Soul, My Son") might have been done more objectively in order to bind the four units more closely together. But then I would have learned nothing of the intensity that can be recognized by a reader who watches a character lose himself in long thought sequences.

A story about children is always a dangerous attempt on the part of a beginning author. In "Only Old People Die," my problem was to avoid the sentimental and commonplace so often found in those stories which have children experiencing death for the first time. It is somewhat different from the other stories in that I use the historical present tense, with several flashbacks into the child's past. I use the historical present tense for the sake of gaining immediacy. It also suggests,

perhaps, that the loss of the mother will be ever-present. The loss is understood only on one level by the boy and he is very anxious to be mature enough to accept it. Hence, his protective attitude toward his sister. The reader is, of course, intended to understand far more than the child. He is supposed to see that the experience is too big to fit the child's dimensions, so to speak.

"No Balloons in the Sky" highlights Brad Townsend's repressed memories which never quite break through to full consciousness. The outgrowth of war and a bad wound he received have resulted in the traumatic experience which finds him returning to the scene of guilt, where he hopes to experience emotional release or "purging." But the reader is led to feel that he has to return, that he has no choice, and yet that he cannot defend his returning, even to himself. His behavior is compulsive and nonrational. There is also the attempt at forcing reality and an unconscious wanting to re-live what he senses has killed him. "Since then it has never been the same," is his recurrent statement made during the latter part of the story, as he reviews in his mind the one memory that he has recalled and that has so discolored his mind. What he thinks is a return has equalled, after all, an escape.

This story is extremely subjective. Structurally, it is a "looped" story; that is, after a beginning there is a loop back into the past which comes around to the present and then almost immediately breaks off. The reason for using this technique is that the writer is trying for the particular effect of the past being laid on top of the present, so to speak, and paralyzing it.

The hideous, "wounded" woman with whom he once went to bed had been the appropriate vessel for release years earlier and so he tries the same

medicine again. This story carries over and becomes an important "cause" for the last, "Wash Your Soul, My Son," in which he goes to a Trappist monastery for security.

Townsend is making another escape from reality in this story. At twenty-nine, he has interrupted his graduate work to visit a monastery. And while he feels that he has solved his problems, it is easy to see that the monastic life will be but another chapter in his search.

This story is also subjective, but less so than "No Balloons in the Sky." It is hoped that there are contrast values between the outside world (Brad on the highway, Brad in the cafe, Brad in conversation with J. D. and Sammie Jo) and the monastic life. In this story, symbol is more important than in the others. For instance, the stained glass picture of Mary is equated with the hideous woman of Oran, in Brad's mind, and purifies it.

II

It is difficult to single out any one author and to say, "This has been my influence." I feel that in terms of theme and subject matter, the major part of No One Is Hurt Forever belongs in the Hemingway tradition. Brad Townsend is my Nick Adams, my man who explores the unsought experiences that have shaped his life. Brad represents a variety of unwanted qualities -- frustration, restlessness, insecurity, desperation.

Brad's despair is matched by longing for some "truths" to live by. To quote from "A Clean Well-Lighted Place":

> Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

The negation, the futility, the "aloneness," runs through these four stories. Certainly this parallels Nick Adams' career as he is characterized as Frederic Henry in A Farewell to Arms, Robert Jordan in For Whom the Bell Tolls, Colonel Cantwell in Across the River and Into the Trees and The Old Man in The Old Man and the Sea.

But this influence was not deliberate. I feel sure that had I never heard of Hemingway, my subject matter would have been the same. The male writer of this century who has directly experienced the effects of war on society and the individual wants to write of the consequences. However, one element of Hemingway's writing I deliberately sought to imitate. I refer to his sharp, crisp dialogue which he so dramatically uses in his stories. He has his characters say only what must be said; nothing more. There is no padding, no long speeches, only the essentials.

Other authors have influenced me. Proust has shown me something about stream-of-consciousness; so has Virginia Woolf. I thought Faulkner would be my mirror for horror and then suddenly I discovered Gide's The Counterfeiters. I wondered for a long time what could be more horrible than Popeye's sexual sadism in Sanctuary, until I read of the provoked suicide of the small boy in The Counterfeiters. Then I thought of the beggar woman I had seen each time I visited Oran. Thus it was that she was introduced in my third story.

I recognize even more the influence of Gide when I open my note-book and find passages I copied more than two years ago while reading The

Counterfeiters. Edouard writes:

> As soon as my book is finished, I shall draw a line and leave the rest to the reader--addition, subtraction, it matters but little; I do not think this ought to be up to me. So much the worse for the lazy reader; it's the others I want. To disturb is my function. The public always prefers to be reassured. There are those whose job this is. There are only too many.

Proust's protagonist, Edouard, replies to Madam Sophoniska when she asks him what the subject matter of his book is to be: "It hasn't got one, and perhaps that's the most astonishing thing about it. My novel hasn't got a subject. Yes, I know, it sounds stupid."

And:

> You ought to understand that it's essentially out of the question for a book of this kind to have a plan. Everything would be falsified if anything were settled beforehand. I wait for reality to dictate to me. My novelist wants to abandon reality, but I shall continually bring him back to it. In fact that will be the subject: the struggle between the facts presented by reality and the ideal reality.

My work has an intangible subject--negation and loss. It is the struggle of Brad Townsend's search for a reality which he believes will offer him peace, happiness and, most of all, security. And, to escape reality, he chooses the ideal reality in the last story, "Wash Your Soul, My Son."

Other influences were Mary Webb and W. H. Hudson. Precious Bane and Green Mansions brought to my attention the use of a complete simplicity by which the story is carried forward easily with no forced attempt at horror or the dramatic. I toned down the grotesque element and experimented with a lighter, simpler story which became "Only Old People Die."

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, has been another author who has had a hand in the shaping of these stories. It was his biographical

novel, The Seven Storey Mountain, that caused me to explore the life of a monk and to gather first hand experience in a Georgia monastery.

So there is no one author who has been directly responsible for the germ and the shaping of these stories. It has been many authors, many people, many experiences that have introduced "disturbing elements" in my mind. There is no well-planned plot in the O. Henry tradition; instead I have tried to transmit the disturbance of mind as Brad Townsend searches for "peace of mind."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ONLY OLD PEOPLE DIE

The boy is quiet and wishes the ladies would be so. But they are busy whispering and the boy only partly hears what they are saying. He sits next to the window and toys with his two-minute egg while the wet, cold rain beats down and the drops burst and spatter against the window-panes. Across from him with a piece of the yellow from an egg hanging on her lower lip, sits his sister, Dorothy.

"Here," he says, "here, eat my toast."

"Don't you want it?"

"No. I don't want it. You eat it."

"No. I don't want it either."

One of the ladies (he is not sure whether it is Mrs. Howell or Mrs. Murphy, there have been so many of them in and out of the house) comes and pours Dorothy's milk. The lady moves across to pick up his glass.

"I can pour my own."

"Yes, I'm sure you can." She turns back to the girl and asks, "Dorothy, how old are you?"

Dorothy looks across at her brother as though searching for help and an answer. But he only stares past her and says nothing. She looks up into the squinting, red eyes of the lady and says, "Six...I'm six, going on seven."

And as though he expects the same query, the boy remarks that he is just past eight. "I won't be nine until December," he informs them, almost, it seems, apologetically, "but I'm still older than she is."

He notices that the ladies still whisper to each other and sometimes shake their heads. Whenever he looks at one of them and she looks back, he turns away and stares again out into the rain.

"It is raining," he says and he wonders why he says it. But because there is nothing else he knows of to talk about, he repeats it. "It is raining."

"Yes, Brad, we know," one of the ladies says. "We know that it is raining."

It is Mrs. Reynolds, the lady with the small dog who lives in the white house three doors down, who says this. He does not like Mrs. Reynolds because her front teeth are missing and whenever she tries to kiss him he thinks he might get sick. She sits there by the large stove and he wonders when she will sneeze again. He hopes soon, for each time she sneezes her face turns very red and her huge, fat body shakes her chins. He and his sister will later joke about this, but now it would be impolite. He watches and while he is watching and staring she begins to quiver as she tries to catch the sneeze. It halfway stops...but only halfway. It is too late and the boy is thinking that she makes noises sounding like air whistling out of one of his balloons.

Her breasts puff and shake and her glasses slip down over her nose. Brad is almost smiling, but stops while she wipes her fat nose with her sleeve. The nose looks like a balloon, a red one before the air is let out, but Brad does not say this to her. Instead he says, "God bless you."

"Thank you. Your Aunt Agnes should be back from the hospital soon. You've finished your egg, haven't you? You too, Dorothy? Well,

wipe your mouths and we'll warm you up with some good hot cocoa. Mrs. Lopes will make it for you." She says this fast and he hears only the first part because the part about the cocoa does not mean anything to him.

"Then why can't I?" he asks.

"Why can't you what?"

"If Aunt Agnes can go to the hospital, why can't I go?"

"Now, Brad," and she becomes patient with him. "Now we've talked about that. You know that no one is allowed to see Mother now. And your aunt is just taking some things that Mother may need later."

He says nothing and she asks about the cocoa again and he says yes only because he is curious as to which one of the ladies is Mrs. Lopes. Mrs. Reynolds is the only one whom he knows by name. He has seen the others at different times, but cannot remember which names belong to what faces. He thinks that perhaps the small one who looks yellow and has the funny mustache might be Mrs. Lopes. When he sees her move towards the closet for some cocoa and a pan, he is satisfied that he has, this once, guessed right.

Still it is raining, even harder, and he looks out to see the bus stop on the corner and two old people slip out of its back door and jog across the street. They look like the little toy dogs he has seen wound up and pushed onto the floor while he watched and wondered where they would go. He follows the people across the street with his sleepy eyes. Then, his sister speaks.

"We won't be able to go out today."

"No. We won't."

"I'll build the playhouse for you tomorrow."

"That will be nice."

"But what will we do today?" she asks.

He does not care what he does today. But he talks to her while he waits for the cocoa which is being stirred around and around by Mrs. Lopes as she leans over the stove and hums a song he has never heard. He would like to tell them that he understands what they are thinking even if he is only eight years old, but he knows that they will only look at him before looking at each other. And, if they think he is not around, whispering, "He's too young." So he turns to the face across from him and asks her what they will do today.

And before his sister can reply, there come suggestions from the ladies. Mrs. Reynolds will take them to the movies or they can go home with Mrs. Lopes and play with Manuel. Brad does not want to go to the movies and Manuel is bigger than he is and often beats him up, so he would rather not go with either one.

"No, thank you. We will stay here and find some games to play."

He feels their anxiety. He knows they are trying to help--are helping--but at the same time he resents their intrusion. For four days now it has been the same. For four days they have been here, sometimes some, sometimes others. When was it, he thinks, when was it that I went to bed the same and woke up and it was all different?

He wants to know without their knowing that he wants to know.

"What is today?" he asks.

"Friday," three of them echo each other, while someone else says that she thinks it is Saturday.

"Yes, Friday," he says. "I should be in school."

He tries to put the pieces together and goes back in his mind day by day. Friday, Thursday, Wednesday, Tuesday. Yes, he thinks, it would have been Tuesday. Monday he went to bed and Tuesday he woke up. But everything has changed and now it is all like this. All these women who are in the kitchen whispering whenever they think he and Dorothy might hear if they speak out loud.

Again he wants to explain to them that he knows, but he holds the words inside him because he feels they are not the right ones.

He stirs his steaming cocoa with a slow, definite motion and turns back to the window watching the hotness from his drink cloud the panes. Friday, thursday, wednesday, tuesday, monday, tuesday, tuesday.....

Tuesday: It is still early when his father taps lightly on the door before pushing it open. Brad cracks one eye open at the sound of footsteps in the hall.

"Brad," he hears his father say. "Brad, are you awake?"

"Yes, sir, sound awake and wide asleep."

His father does not laugh. Dorothy does.

"Good. You're both awake. Dorothy, come over here next to Brad so that I can talk to both of you."

She takes the rag doll by the good arm and skips across the room from her bed to his. When she is tucked in beside Brad, their father begins.

"Now, I want you both to listen carefully to what I have to say. Very carefully, for this is important." Brad knows this without being told, for his father had neither laughed at their standing joke nor thrown a pillow at Dorothy. "Last night," he continues, "Mother went to Saint Mary's Hospital and..."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Because she was sick, Dorothy, and Dr. Morris thought it best that she go."

"Did you go with her?" Brad asks.

"Yes, Brad, I went along with Mother."

"In the car?"

"No, Brad, but I was with her."

"Then how did you go, Daddy, if you didn't drive the car?" Dorothy wants to know.

"Doctor Morris decided to send an ambulance."

"And it came right here to the house during the night?"

"That's right, Dorothy."

"Were we asleep?"

"I think so, Brad. We didn't have time to wake you so you could say goodbye to Mother."

"I'd like to have seen the ambulance," says Dorothy.

"Did they blow the siren?"

"Yes, Brad," and he lowers his already low voice, "I'm afraid they did blow it."

"Golly. And you rode in it?" says Dorothy.

No answer.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Brad."

"Is Mother going to have a baby?"

"No, Brad. You know how your mother has always had a bad heart and how she's been sick. This time it hurt her a little more and so she's gone to the hospital where they can take better care of her. You know the cold she's had? Well, it's made her very weak. I hope she won't be gone for too long."

"Yes, but..."

"Yes, but what, Brad?"

"Well, Jimmy Stokely says that people who go to hospitals either go there to have babies or to..." He hesitates.

"Or to what, Brad?"

"Or to die."

When his father speaks again he calls him Bradford and because he calls him this he pays special attention.

"Don't be absurd, Bradford," his father says. "Your mother certainly isn't going to die. Your mother is very young and only old people die."

"But is she...?"

"She'll be well soon, Brad," his father says.

Then he becomes less serious and tells them that Mrs. Reynolds has come over to cook breakfast and for them to hurry downstairs. "I'm going back to the hospital and I probably won't be back until supper. Aunt Agnes is with her now and will probably come home when I get there.

And I'll ask the nurse to tell Mother that you both send your love and that you promise to be good children."

"Why don't you tell her yourself, Daddy?"

"Because she's still sleeping, Dorothy, and has to be very quiet. Perhaps the doctor will let me talk to her when she wakes up later."

He rumples Brad's hair and kisses Dorothy on the nose before he leaves. Then Dorothy gets out of bed, slips into a bright pink pinafore and goes down the hall into the bathroom to wash. Brad lies there looking at the high ceiling with the black splotches where he has bounced tennis balls from his bed to the top. I wonder if I'll ever be old enough to reach that high, he thinks.

He looks across the room at the large picture directly opposite the foot of the bed. Hanging there above the enclosed fireplace the picture appears to make even that look small. As he stares it seems to grow and the red and purple mountains spread into the too-blue sky. One peak, the highest, holds his eyes. Though it is high above, the peak is squat across and looks back at him as though playing "stare-me-down." The rocks and stones are formed so that they make an unnatural, grotesque face, a leering face which always frightens him. He looks into its eyes of tree-trunks and thinks for an instant that they smile back at him. "The Old Man of the Mountains," that is the name of the picture, so his father has told him. Yes, thinks Brad, you are old. Almost as old as Grandpa used to be. He tries to imagine himself as being old and wonders if there is any such thing as a mountain dying. The caves that are its mouth gape on the taut canvas and Brad turns on his side and then slips yawningly out of bed and onto the floor where he sits and puts on his

shoes and socks. He crosses to the bureau drawer for a shirt and then stands before the mirror while he fumbles with the top buttons. He does not look at the mirror, but rather at the picture in the small, silver, oval frame on top of the white cloth. His mother smiles back. Her hair is blacker than the sweater he slips over his head and her pursed lips and great green eyes make his mother seem very attractive. You're pretty, he thinks. He knows she is pretty because if she were not he never would enjoy seeing her come by his school on visitor's day. He is so proud of her that he would beg her to come. It is his way of showing off; of saying he knows that he has the prettiest mother in school. He looks again while he tightens his belt and says, "How bad it would be if you were old--like Grandmother and Grandpa Jason were."

"Brad." His sister is back in the bedroom.

"Yes?"

"I've already eaten my breakfast," she says. "I've already eaten and Mrs. Reynolds says that your breakfast is getting cold. Hurry up."

"Sure." Then as she turns away from him, he calls her back. He wants to tell her that their mother is gone for only a little while, but instead he says, "Sis, I wonder if mountains ever die like old people do." And when he says it, he wonders why he did.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, mountains don't die, silly."

And before he can tell her about the other, she has gone.

Then he reaches up and takes the picture from the bureau and looks

at it for a long time before he crosses over to the bedside table and puts it beside the lamp. It looks better there. He can see it first thing in the morning and that will be much nicer than waking up and seeing the huge rock face. He does not want to tell his father that the rock frightens him. His father understands most things but Brad is not sure that he might not tease him about this. While he gazes from one picture to the other he remembers what he has just wanted to tell his sister; about their mother going to the hospital. For only a little while, he whispers silently while he sits on the floor to tie his shoes. For only a little while. For only Tuesday, wednesday, thursday, friday, friday, fri.....

"Brad, your cocoa is getting cold. Why don't you drink it while it's still warm?"

Brad hears it said because the last time it is said, it is louder than before. He shakes his head in a snappish motion and brushes his eyes with his hand.

"It's all right, Brad. I'll just warm it up for you."

He turns from the window just long enough to see that it is Mrs. Lopes who is speaking and that the others have gone.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. Where did Dorothy go?"

"Upstairs with Mrs. Reynolds. Mrs. Howell and Mrs. Browning have gone home."

"But it's raining."

"Yes, Brad. It's still raining. It may stop soon."

"Do you like it? I mean the rain?"

"No. It makes everything seem so cold and dreary. But here, Brad, here's your cocoa and there's another cookie if you're still hungry."

"Has my aunt come home yet?"

"No, not yet, Brad. But she should be back soon."

"Mrs. Lopes?"

"Yes?"

"Why haven't I been able to go to the hospital to see my mother?"

"She has to have a lot of rest, Brad. Visitors might bother her, so only your father and aunt are allowed right now."

"But am I a visitor?"

"...No."

"Is it that I'm not old enough? Is that it?"

"Of course not, Brad. But sister isn't old enough and you wouldn't want to leave her at home, would you?"

"No. I suppose not. Dorothy wouldn't understand, would she?"

"I don't believe she would, Brad. She's not as old as you are and it might be hard to explain to her. Wouldn't it?"

"Yes'm. I guess it would."

He opens the window from the bottom, just a crack, and feels the dampness and wetness sneak through from the outside. The cold air wakes him for a moment and the steam disappears from the panes. He closes the window again and looks out as the rain beats upon it. He is tired and so he lets his eyes close while he sits still and he listens to the rain

which is making wet noises against the window. The rain the rain the rain the rain

falls into his face and he is standing while a man talks about God and all he knows is that Grandpa is dead.

And all mixed up with Grandpa being dead is his mother explaining to him that he can't have a birthday party this year because it wouldn't be nice. But next year when he is six there will be a party for him because he will be a big boy then and will understand why there is no party for being five years old.

His mother has told him that God has sent his angels after Grandpa and that none of them should cry. But when he looks around he sees that she is crying and wonders why. If Grandpa will be as happy as his mother has told him, then why is she crying?

He had been an old man when he died. Brad is not sure how old, but knows that it is older than anything he or anyone has ever seen.

His mother had told him he is big enough to understand that Grandpa has sick eyes and cannot see as well as Brad. So sometimes he would help his grandfather to pick out his ties and socks.

Grandpa did not hear too well either. One afternoon he had been listening to the radio and had it turned up very high. Brad was playing on the floor and paid little attention when the doorbell rang because he knew the doorbell noise came from the radio and not from the front door. But his grandfather got up out of his chair and walked toward the door. Brad knew he should say something but he thought it would be fun to play a trick and then they could both laugh. He jumped into the chair to

wait for Grandfather to come back to where he had been sitting.

"Nobody there. Must have been mistaken."

Brad was about to laugh and say "April Fool" even though it wasn't really April Fool time. Something in the way the old man looked made him stop before he said it so he slid down from the chair and went back to his soldiers. But he no longer enjoyed the battles that afternoon. He thought of what being old might be like. Not to be able to see and hear like his friends and father and mother.

Once he had seen his grandfather cry. Mother and Father had scolded him for it, but later they told him that if he hadn't really understood, then they should not have blamed him for what had happened.

His sister was in the high chair and he sat across from Grandfather while his father and mother sat at the other ends of the table. His mother was paying a great deal of attention to Dorothy.

"What's a mole do?"

"What's that, Brad?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Brad. You know better," said his mother.

"I just wanted to know what a mole was."

"Oh, that's a kind of spot that some people have. It doesn't hurt anything."

Brad thought for a minute.

"You understand, son?" asked his father.

"No, sir. I don't think so."

"Well, it's...where did you hear the word?"

"Larry Crawford."

"What did he say it was?"

"I don't know. I thought it had something to do with Grandpa."

"Why should that be? Larry wouldn't know if Grandpa had a mole or not, would he?"

"I don't know. I don't understand."

"Well, what did he say about the mole?"

"Something about how Grandpa had about as much business above the ground as a mole. And everybody thought it was funny, so I laughed. But I don't understand it."

Brad felt them all turn to him. And his grandfather, who had been picking his teeth with his fingers, opened his mouth as though to say something. Instead, Brad saw the old man blink his eyes and reach for a handkerchief.

"Go to your room for a few minutes, Brad," his mother said gently.

"Did I do something wrong again?"

"No, dear. Just leave for a little while and then you can come back when I call you."

As he climbed the stairs he could hear the old man making noises and saying things like it was time for him to die. "I'm just in the way. I need Sarah and she's gone," Brad heard him say.

That was all before and now because he is so old he is dead and the man is standing there while the rain rolls around his black hat and he is talking about God and Grandpa and angels while his book gets all wet. Brad thinks that Grandpa would like this, all except the rain, because there are a lot of people and every now and then he hears someone say a nice thing about his grandfather. But the rain is making him cold

and hungry and one shoe is squishy with the wetness that has gotten inside. While they drive home he only listens to the noise that the windshield wipers make and says nothing of what he has been thinking.

It is his aunt who is shaking him gently with her hand on his shoulder.

"Hello, Brad."

"Hello, Aunt Agnes. I fell asleep. Is Mother still sleeping?"

"Yes, Brad." She has not expected this question. It confuses her for only a moment and she suggests that Brad might be tired and should rest.

"Not right now. I think I'll wait until Dad comes home."

He looks at her while he listens to the rain. He begins to ask her why his father will be late and then tells himself not to.

"What did you start to say, Brad?"

"Nothing, I guess. Mother's worse, isn't she? I can tell."

"Yes, I think you can. You're a big boy now, Brad, and I really do think you can understand."

She begins to cry and then Brad knows better than she how well he does understand. "She's not going to get well?"

"No, Brad, I'm afraid Mother won't ever be well again."

He gives her his handkerchief from his back pocket and then takes it back.

"Mother's gone with Grandpa, hasn't she?"

"Yes, Brad darling, she has."

"Let me tell my sister."

"Yes, you should tell her, Brad. Go upstairs and tell her."

He leaves the cocoa and passes through the high arch into the living room. Some of the ladies have come back and they are crying. He says nothing to them and looks away from them.

He climbs the stairs and goes into the dark room where his sister has pulled the shades. Dorothy is sleeping on his bed with her rag doll snuggled up close to her. He walks to her, sits on the bed and calls her. She is dreaming and wakes with a start. When Dorothy sits up and moves her arm to wipe the sleep from her eyes, her hand hits the table and the picture falls and the glass cracks.

"It will be easy now," he thinks.

A FLAG FOR A SOLDIER

The gray-steel ship rode with its well-decks high above the placid ocean. Her barrels of crude oil and gallons of octane had been discharged in a small, dirty seaport in North Africa. Now the crew mechanically settled down to the anticipated routine of the fifteen days' journey back to the States.

Forward, on the foc'sle, a small balloon-like man sat on the number one hatch and tried to catch some part of the breeze. Even though he pointed his face towards the bow, the sweat still ran off his partly bald head, past his eyes and lumpy nose and then virtually cascaded down his short, thick neck onto his hairy back and front. Chief Bosun Rothstein drew a breath and let it out as slowly as he had sucked it in. Then he grapsed the silver whistle which hung from his neck and piped a series of high, shrill noises which was the signal for the deck crew to begin their work again.

From the flying bridge, just below the top of the superstructure, Signalman Brad Townsend looked down and saw the deckhands ease themselves out of their compartments and lunchtime poker games and slowly move forward up-ship where they received work orders from Chief Rothstein. Townsend could hear the routine grumbling as the work details were assigned to various groups and individuals. One crew would continue to paint forward while another would chip and scrape aft. Good God, thought Townsend, what a helluva way to fight a war; paint and then when the damn ship shines with the stuff they reverse the process, chip and scrape it off and then begin to paint again. Anything to keep busy.

He was standing the twelve to four signal watch and thus was responsible for any interchange of signals between the other ships of the convoy and the Merrimac, his own. Methodically his eyes patrolled the starboard side of the fleet and saw nothing in particular while seeing everything in general. Far ahead with her sixteen-inch guns slanted in different directions, ploughed the twenty-year-old flagship of the taskforce, the U. S. S. Texas. In mechanical columns spreading from her port and starboard beams were grouped the troop ships, cargo ships, merchant vessels and other craft, each behind the one in front. Along and about the horizon swept the destroyers and their escorts traveling at twice the speed of the ten-knot convoy as they cut circles across the spacious green-blue ocean in search of undersea danger. Most of the ships rode high, having left their cargoes: tons of ammunition, crates of food, piles of coal and thousands of troops at a number of European and African ports just before the D-Day assault on Southern France. Now they were returning with many of the wounded and some prisoners.

Brad moved from the wing and walked across the calm deck of the wheelhouse to the hot-plate and the smell of coffee. He poured what might have passed for black ink into the cracked, porcelain, dirty-white mug. He watched the steam and wondered about asking Rothstein to play some poker later on that night. It would be a good way to find out what kind of guy he really is, he thought. The coffee cooled and then he slurped its muddiness through to the bottom before going back out to the wing.

"Brad."

"Yeah?" It was Moreno calling him from the number three twenty millimeter.

"Looks like a signal at about zero-nine-zero. See it?"

Townsend brushed the hair and squint from his eyes and turned to face the starboard side almost directly abeam of the ship. He spelt out the quick brightness of dots and dashes as the light flashed speedily ... A037 v DD661 --- A037 v DD661 ... it flickered on and off. His call.

"Damn," he said while he called to the quartermaster in the same breath, "damn, Bob, copy for me while I read this, will you?" He adjusted his own signal light and in brief moments the message was being received and each two or three words were acknowledged. And when the individual letters and collective words had all been grouped, the quartermaster read it aloud to Townsend. "Have you Doctor aboard?" it began, "Have seriously ill patient requiring immediate treatment. Can we transfer soonest? Patient is 'Rinso-White.' Signed, Commanding Officer."

"Now what the hell kind of crap is that, Brad? What's that stuff about Rinso-White?"

"Must be part of the code group for the convoy. The Old Man didn't give me a list this trip so I don't have the least idea what it stands for. Hell, maybe somebody gave him a bath."

The Officer of the Deck, Ensign Carney, had taken the slip of paper from Townsend's hands and left the wing to go below to the Captain's Deck. He stood for a second outside the panelled oak door before knocking.

"Enter," the Captain shouted and he did.

The captain looked like one. Though he was the only Annapolis man on board, still he tolerated his officers with a peculiar sort of understanding.

The officers liked to think that the Old Man was stuck aboard a ship in the Auxiliary Navy due to some breach of duty. The enlisted men's scuttlebutt had it that he had been wounded in the North African invasion and that it was either a command aboard the 'Mac or a desk in Washington with a small chair for his two hundred and fifty pounds with no deck to pace. He chose the command.

The captain read, then exploded in a gentlemanly way as only officers can do. "My God, Carney, there must be other doctors in this convoy. Couldn't they transfer him to another ship?"

Carney knew from experience that he wasn't expected to answer and he did his duty well. He stood and stared while he tried to look as though he knew just half of what the captain hoped he did.

"Well," Captain Homering continued, "well, I suppose there's nothing to do but to take the sonofabitch aboard." Carney wanted to know why the sick man had developed into a sonofabitch and what the code word meant, but decided that this might not be the best time to ask.

"Carney, are you listening to me? I said we'll have to take him aboard. I don't suppose he can be too bad or he would have been put on a ship with a doctor in the first place. They might think that we won't roll as much in the heavy seas as some of these other ships." Carney stood there. "Very well, Carney, send word back that we'll accept him as soon as the fleet commander gives us permission. Tell the crew to

stand by for a ship to come alongside. I'll join you in a few minutes."

Townsend relayed the message across to the tin can on the fringe of the horizon. Another message was sent to the commander of the task-force and the Merrimac received permission to drop astern of the convoy. Captain Homering shouted orders to the navigation officer and the quartermaster spun the wheel while instructions were barked into the speaking tube connected to the engine room. Fifty-four minutes later the ship was at the rear of the convoy with the crew anticipating the excitement.

Destroyers hovered about protectively. Rothstein grumbled at this interruption of routine while he told his men to hurry up with the necessary lines, tackle and various rigging which would be needed for the always hazardous operation of transferring a man from one ship to the other.

The destroyer received the signal to make her approach and then began to ease along the fantail of the big oiler, cutting her powerful turbines and seeming to squat like a little brother alongside a larger one. The line guns were fired and in almost no time a human conveyer belt was set up between the two ships while both maintained a speed of some six knots. Gun and deck crews looked across at each other in silence and stared without expression or meaning.

The officers and men on the deck of the Merrimac must have seen him at the same instant for there was an involuntary gasp and then a nervous silence before Carney said, "Good God, look at him," which was a foolish thing to say because they were. Just twenty-yards away they saw a shrunken little head with whiteness bundling him from toes to

neck. He looked very small and terribly scared as he prepared for the voyage across the few long yards of Atlantic.

Both ships lurched ponderously and periodically in constant quiver-like motions and spasms in the current which they generated between their beams. Alternately the thick hawsers and lines tightened and slackened. Captain Homering yelled across to "Get him in the chair and get your Goddamn ship the hell away."

The crew looked again and saw the men on the destroyer literally forcing the man into the bosun chair and then strapping him down. Finally he was in and the trip began as the destroyer crew strained on the line which would pull him across. He was about halfway over when the two ships chose exactly the wrong moment to dip towards each other in the cross current; the Merrimac to starboard and the destroyer to port. The lines slacked and while the captain cursed and yelled at the youthful lieutenant across on the other bridge to pull away, Rothstein screamed at his men, "Tighten up, damn it, tighten up on that line."

If the sea had been rough the man would surely have been lost. If he had been scared before the journey began, he must have been literally paralyzed with fear when it was over. He was pulled aboard with the blanket which bound him soaking wet. Those who saw him before Doc Griffin hurried him off the crowded deck into the sick bay kept the conversation going well through supper, and all that evening sick-bay had fourteen visitors with assorted and impossible complaints. "You bunch of goldbricking phonies," the H.A. deuce had told them, "nobody ain't gonna see the sonofabitch so all of you get the hell out of here unless you're dying 'cause he is."

Someone said that he was being sent back to the States for hospitalization and that he was supposed to be decorated for bravery at Normandy. "The Congressional Medal, I suppose?" someone asked and suggested. "Sure, that's it. Honest to God. I heard Carney telling the exec about it just before chow."

Another theory was that he was a basket case and that that was why they had only seen his head. It took only a second for some ingenious, imaginative mind to fuse the rumors and soon it was an accepted fact that he had been wounded at the beachhead and was on his way to Walter Reed Hospital where Roosevelt would personally give him the Medal of Honor.

Seaman second, John Feary, had seen him when he had come aboard and then listened while the others talked. Later, after chow was over, he sought out Townsend, finally finding him stretched out on the forward hatch breathing in the hot darkness of the night.

"Brad, it's me. John."

"Yeah, John, what's on your mind? Don't tell me that they're saying it's Patton coming home in disguise."

John laughed for a second, nervously.

"But Brad, you saw him, didn't you?" he asked.

"Sure I did. I got a helluva good look and I don't particularly care if I never get another one."

John sat for a little while, then leaned over and cautiously asked, "What was the spoon in his mouth for, Brad?"

"I'm not sure," the answer floated back through the still blackness, "I've been wondering about that myself. I think it must have

something to do with keeping him from choking."

More silence, only breathing.

Then from John again, quietly almost like a prayer, "Brad, he's going to die. I could see it in his eyes and he's scared as all hell."

After that, just the sound of the ship swishing into the sea and far across the beam they both could see the silvery phosphorous carving paths in the ocean.

Finally John spoke again, slowly. "Brad. Did you see the eyes?"

Brad had seen the eyes and he was looking at them even then, seeing their red reflection in the huge, black sky. The eyes were almost all that could be seen, not really the eyes themselves, but the slots, the hollow holes where they just barely were, sunk far back on a level with the gaunt, high cheek bone where the faceskin was pulled death-tight. The head was shaved. Brad wondered why.

Later, in bed, he lay there staring with his own eyes shut tight while he tried to blot out the shrunken death head before him. The long mouth stayed clenched with fear and pain and the eyes kept following him from beneath the shiny, crooked head. The sweat had soaked the bed and his hair was matted with smelly perspiration. A quick shower helped to chase the tiredness from his body, but his mind lingered and wondered. Dear God, he thought, how would I feel if I were in there? What would I do? He can't talk and he's dying every minute. Worst of all, he knows it. He knows he's dying.

The words whispered themselves out and away from his mind and he climbed the ladder on the way to his station for the mid-watch while he finished buttoning his dungaree shirt. He passed beneath the sick bay

porthole and wondered whether he had imagined or had really heard a guttural sound from the inside. Then he hungrily sucked in the hot air, which, at least, was a change from the stuffiness of the hotter compartment.

He relieved the watch, drank coffee black again, and then tried to think of something pleasant --- anything. Nothing came except a combination of wonder and fear. Haflway through the watch he was surprised to turn and see the captain and Dr. Griffin standing together in the small passageway between the wing and the wheelhouse. The captain has just asked what had happened.

"The inevitable," the doctor replied in his high pitched, almost girl-like voice. "Breathing became impossible about an hour ago. I made the discovery just in time and cut through the neck to insert tubes into the trachea. He's more comfortable now."

"He'll live then." It wasn't a question, simply a statement in a cautious, matter of fact tone.

"No. He'll die. Within twenty-four hours. I can't save him. He was dead when he came aboard. You saw that."

The captain sighed and said something about how damn complicated some things could become and that when he died they would probably become even more so. He turned and opened his log to write up the day's report.

Two hours later Townsend was back in his sack and sleep came from sheer exhaustion rather than tiredness. The morning was half gone when he awoke at a few minutes past nine and saw Rothstein's bulk plopped in the sagging bed across from his own. "Hi, Chief," he said and smiled

when Rothstein said something about him being a lazy goldbricker.

"Chief," he continued, slowly while he felt for his words, "what do you think about the guy? I was sort of wondering what you might be thinking."

"Why?"

"Well, because...I mean it might be different with you. You're Jewish and I just thought it might make some difference about how you felt..." then hesistatingly as though he had said too much before he had really said anything ... "maybe."

"Different? Different how?"

"I guess I mean are you sorry; because he's dying, I mean?"

"He's dying, ain't he? What the hell you want me to do? Send flowers?" Rothstein had his head down and tied his left shoe while he was saying it. Then he walked away before Townsend could catch his eye. He thought that he had understood what the chief might be saying, but he didn't want to be too sure. Rothstein knew by now; most of the crew knew now who the sick man was and so they would be able to invent new stories to while away their lonesomeness on the still-long journey.

Brad Townsend sat and puffed, watching his smoke rings weave themselves into gaunt, long shapes and saw emptiness where eyes should be.

ii

At 2007 that same evening the sick man vomited on an empty stomach, burst his blood loose from his bowels, hemorrhaged and died with his eyes open.

iii

The Officer of the Deck woke Townsend an hour later, three hours before he was due topside to man his watch. He told him that he was wanted on the Captain's Deck on the double. Minutes later, salutes were exchanged in the darkness; tonight there was just a part of the moon hanging down and pin-pointing small circles in the sea. The captain startled Townsend out of his sleep by addressing him by his first name.

"Brad," he began, "he's dead and the funeral will have to be tomorrow. We can't keep the body until we hit port so he'll have to be buried here. I've checked his diary and I'm taking personal responsibility about seeing that he receives a full military funeral." Brad Townsend thought the Old Man looked unusually tired while he slowed his words in a style which was foreign to him; usually he barked his words, chopping them into quick, small pieces. "The body has to have a flag if it's to be a military funeral, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Brad replied, realizing now what he had been called for. "I'll start immediately, sir. There's some cloth in the signal-bags and I might finish by morning. Full size?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, I suppose so. Just so you can finish it."

Next morning at the regular 0900 muster the word was passed to all hands that their passenger had died. Notice was given that all men not on watch would muster on the quarterdeck at 1100 in dress whites for the funeral. The executive officer mentioned something about pall-bearers and the men glanced uneasily at one another while they waited.

"Suppose we take different ranks," the exec decided for them.

"I'll be one. Then if Lieutenant Martin and Ensign Carney can make it we'll have three of the six. Rothstein, how about you from the CPO Division and then we can fill out with two seamen?"

"No sir," came back Rothstein's answer clear and as sharp as the morning sun which followed the ship. The captain heard, turned from the officer he had been speaking to and in a semi-serious yet bantering tone asked the chief, "Why, Rothstein? Superstitious?"

The men near the chief pretended not to hear and looked as though they wished to move away, for they knew before the captain did. Rothstein raised his eyes and caught the captain's on a dead center before he let himself say, "Because I'm a Jew, sir."

Everyone heard but no one said anything and the men watched the shine on their shoes in the embarrassed silence. The captain recovered his stumble quickly and stared at him.

"Because you're a ... Good Lord, Rothstein, I apologize. I never in this world gave it a thought." Turning to the executive officer he continued, "It might be a better idea at that to find six men of his own faith. Yes, I do believe that that might be more appropriate. He was a Lutheran, Lieutenant."

iv

At 1100 the men lined the quarterdeck in tight fitting white uniforms and hats along with black shoes and neckerchiefs. Robinson, who saw the services from his perch high above in the crow's nest, remarked at chow that it had looked like a "bunch of little white sticks on a picket fence trimmed with black." The men paired off in four long

lines and whispered right and left as they kept their eyes focussed on midship, watching the hatch that opened into the sick bay. They felt the ship slow her speed and someone mentioned in a muted tone that this was so because when they dropped the man over the side, it wouldn't do to have him caught in the giant screw of the ship. The others nodded at his knowledge.

Some pretended resentment at this interruption, this transgression of fixed routine. It was sham, however, for secretly they were enjoying it the same as if they were home watching the Red Sox and Yankees or a square dance in the fire hall. This was a show and while they waited for the main character to make his appearance they talked about the man impersonally, almost making him a neuter. Just then the executive officer appeared on the bridge with the bugler by his side. Before the bugle reached the lips of the straw haired boy, the exec called for attention in a loud, commanding voice and below him the quarterdeck became still as the men became straight and stayed stiff. Heads did not move, but the eyes in them squeezed and slanted so that the men saw the sick bay hatch open and the captain step through and out. Behind him came the pallbearers, struggling almost profanely and sacrilegiously to move the shrouded figure through the narrow opening. The captain waited until the great flag was draped over the small lump and the procession began along the catwalk with the captain looking sad and monkish. Closer they came to the group and the captain finally halted near the bottom of the giant mast from which the American flag hung. The body thumped to the deck between the rows of men and they gazed uneasily, heads held still stiff until the captain commanded

them, "At ease."

They tried, but weren't. The captain began: "We have gathered here this morning to bury a man whom we could not save. God has called him and we must commit his soul to Him and his body to the sea. I have learned that this man was a soldier, at that a brave one. He was wounded on June sixteenth, three miles North of St. Lo. He came aboard our ship to die and did so, leaving a wife and three children. I am taking the personal responsibility of seeing that he is afforded a full military funeral. I shall now read from The Book of Common Prayer."

With that he bowed his head and the men did likewise as he began, "The Lord is my Shepherd ..." and his voice droned on sonorously while the crew lifted their eyelashes close to their eyebrows and thought about death. Ensign Carney involuntarily shuddered when he thought of what would happen when the emaciated body, so heavy with weights, fell into the sea. So far to the bottom he thought; how far, he wondered?

Brad Townsend came out of a trance just long enough to catch the trailing words of the captain as he finished "..... these few lines of poetry which I will read."

His voice dropped and the words rolled out pompously as he tried to play Prospero. Indeed, John Feary remarked to Brad later that all the Old Man lacked was the makeup; Brad countered that it was a lucky thing that Ogden Nash had not written anything with the word "sea" in it or the captain might have seized on that for his closing dramatic effect.

He was almost finished, Brad hoped:

"...Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.

Then, as though at a prearranged signal, when the captain was finished, the bearers grasped their burden and walked to the edge of the deck where they lifted the body high. Again, by prearrangement, the gunnery officer gave the order to the gunners' mates and they lifted their rifles high to skyward and split the silence with simultaneous shots; they fired three times. Then while the bugler puffed out a nasal "Taps," the men let go of their burden, not gracefully, but timidly, and the body hung for a fleeting second that seemed like a longer minute. At the last instant the flag was snatched from the shroud. From the deck the men heard only the splash as the body cleaved the water. It was almost over. Townsend moved to the mizzen-mast on the captain's order and lowered the Stars and Stripes to half-mast. As he did so, other ships in the convoy followed suit. It was then that the captain called for the flag which had been dedicated in death. As he moved and handed it to Townsend he informed the crew that upon arrival in port it would be turned over to the Red Cross so that they might forward it to the deceased's family.

"Townsend," he said just before he dismissed the crew, "take charge of the flag until that time."

As the lines broke, the men passed by on their way to the compartments where they would change to working clothes. They passed and stared at Townsend and the huge, homemade flag without speaking. The deck was cleared when Rothstein walked over to him, standing alone, and looked straight at him.

"Here, Brad, let me help you."

Rothstein took a side of the blood-red flag and stood away from him while they held it straight. They moved toward each other with a few steps and folded it over twice so that the large white circle in the center stood out more predominantly. One more fold and the blackness of the crooked lines overshadowed the white and the red. Brad tucked it under his arm, looked at Rothstein and they walked away together.

It was over.

NO BALLOONS IN THE SKY

The anchor detail was ready. When word came to "drop the hook" they did. Brad Townsend's watch said twelve minutes past six.

Damn, he thought, if the old man had waited one more minute to let the hook go I'd have had the pot. Three hundred bucks.

"Who's got twelve? Who's got the lucky number?" everyone wanted to know.

From high above them came the answer. It was Cosetti who was standing his watch in the crow's nest. "Me. Up here. I got the number. I got twelve," he yelled down to the men who had left jobs throughout the ship, now that they were secured.

"Hey, the guinea got it," somebody shouted and in no time the name Cosetti was the magic word, the password to the peculiar sort of glory that comes to a man who sweats out sixty days of slow duty on a slow freight to see if the ship would anchor at the exact moment corresponding to the number he had drawn from Cookie's greasy cap.

"Cosetti got it? Why the little bastard probably had three clocks up there with him so he could make sure what time it was when he told the bridge that all was clear," someone said. It was Randall, the first mate.

Even while they were kidding him they were spending the money. Custom decreed that he must buy drinks for all who wanted to drink for as long as the money would hold out. What was left he could keep but past performances of the crew indicated that Cosetti would have little to send home.

Randall yelled to Cosetti. "Hey, Tony. C'mon down and let's start talking how we're going to spend it."

Cosetti came sprawling down the long ladder with arms and legs flying in different directions. When he was five or six feet from the deck he let go of the ladder and jumped, landing on all fours. Picking himself up, he raced back in the direction of the galley to collect his money. Randall followed him.

Jim Anderson was walking alongside Townsend. "Lucky little wop, ain't he. Ever notice how lucky wops are?"

"Yeah."

"Damn if us and the guinea don't pitch a good liberty with all that dough."

"I suppose so."

"Suppose so, hell. I know damn well I will. Even in this hell-hole."

Then that's the difference between us, Brad thought. That's what makes you what you are and me somebody else. He stopped outside the passageway and said something about tying his shoe. That way Anderson moved on and Brad was alone. He walked on up to the flying bridge.

"Hi, Brad," Nat Goodwin said.

"Hi," Brad replied and knew there would be nothing else said unless he said it first. Nat, of all the crew, seemed best to understand that sometimes there was nothing else to say so far as Brad Townsend was concerned. Nat had grown accustomed to Brad's evening visits.

The sun was about to fall behind one of the steep hills which surrounded the bay. The inlet from the Atlantic had been just wide

enough for the freighter to slip through. It lay still, now, in the ship-cluttered harbor and the city seemed to build itself around the bay as it sat high above it, on the hills, looking down.

Oran. Dirty, stinking Oran with the smell of scum and filth, Brad mused. He looked up just in time to see the last patches of sunlight splash against some of the white apartment windows. What a sham, he thought. He knew too well what lay beyond those white apartment buildings: filth--shacks, huts, caves; people--brown, black, white.

"Staying up here for awhile, Brad?"

Brad turned. "Guess so. For a little while anyway. Why?"

"Just thought maybe you'd relieve me while I ducked down to the head for a minute. Be back in time for you to make chow."

"Sure. I think I'll skip chow anyway. Go ahead."

"Thanks. See you."

Shadows from the hills were still slipping down and falling into the sea. Longer and longer they fanned out until the sea was black instead of the greenish-blue color that looked more like the ink he filled his Parker 51 with. His mind, like the shadows, fell down from the hills, remembering when this same town had been blasted and scorched with shells fired from the ships. Now it was quiet. He noticed that the balloons which had hung over the city to snare enemy planes in their steel cables were gone.

"Townsend. Townsend. That you up there?"

Christ, what now, Brad thought as he crossed the bridge to where a dumpy figure was puffing up the ladder. "Yes, Captain?"

"The bosun tells me you been here before. That right?"

enough for the freighter to slip through. It lay still, now, in the ship-cluttered harbor and the city seemed to build itself around the bay as it sat high above it, on the hills, looking down.

Oran. Dirty, stinking Oran with the smell of acum and filth, Brad mused. He looked up just in time to see the last patches of sunlight splash against some of the white apartment windows. What a sham, he thought. He knew too well what lay beyond those white apartment buildings: filth--shacks, huts, caves; people--brown, black, white.

"Staying up here for awhile, Brad?"

Brad turned. "Guess so. For a little while anyway. Why?"

"Just thought maybe you'd relieve me while I ducked down to the head for a minute. Be back in time for you to make chow."

"Sure. I think I'll skip chow anyway. Go ahead."

"Thanks. See you."

Shadows from the hills were still slipping down and falling into the sea. Longer and longer they fanned out until the sea was black instead of the greenish-blue color that looked more like the ink he filled his Parker 51 with. His mind, like the shadows, fell down from the hills, remembering when this same town had been blasted and scorched with shells fired from the ships. Now it was quiet. He noticed that the balloons which had hung over the city to snare enemy planes in their steel cables were gone.

"Townsend. Townsend. That you up there?"

Christ, what now, Brad thought as he crossed the bridge to where a dumpy figure was puffing up the ladder. "Yes, Captain?"

"The bosun tells me you been here before. That right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You mean you been here before. That so?"

"Yes, sir. That's so."

"And you never said nothing about it to me? That right?"

Brad started to tell him that this was the first time he knew that the captain might be interested in his past travels, but he changed his mind and said nothing.

"God damn it, Townsend. You saw the hell we played getting through the inlet. You might have been able to help us out. Right?"

"Perhaps, Captain. I just didn't think about it."

"That's the trouble with you ex-Navy swabs. Think you're too damn good for the merchant marine. Too damn good to be sailing with a top-notch crew. What the hell you pick my ship to sail on for?"

"Seaman's office said you were shipping to Oran. I wanted to go." For a second he was afraid that the captain would ask why.

"Then I suppose you know the town, too. Right?"

"Yes, sir. It's been eight years but I don't suppose too much has changed since I was here last."

"Okay. But I want you on the bridge when we shove off next week. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll be there."

The captain left. Brad wished he had been left alone. He never felt quite the same when he had to speak to the captain. Any captain. Even when he passed him on the deck and only nodded, it sometimes upset him and it would be sometime before his stomach became hungry again.

He found Nat's binoculars and brought them back to the signal bag

and stretched out on top of the soft bunting. Stars had appeared and they hung high and low. He watched them through the glasses while he lay on his back and looked straight up. They were close. Immediate. They became all part of what he was and wished and wanted.

His sockets grew sore from the heaviness. He turned the binoculars over so that the large part of the glass was now resting over his eyes. That's more like it. More comfortable, he thought.

This is better, easier because now they're even further than they're supposed to be. Binoculars. Two-hundred power. Brings things two hundred times nearer you than they really are. Turn them over as you would a card in a game of solitare and what's a million miles away goes two-hundred-million miles away. It's all done with glasses. The big stars are smaller. The smaller ones are tiny. The tiny ones are gone. Like memories. Great ones. Small ones. Tiny ones. Gone. Get a four-hundred power glass. Turn it over. Nothing's there.

Point it down at your foot and try to walk across the deck and you stumble because you don't see what was there because it's gone. Like the German Stukas screaming and diving out of the sky in the middle of powdered milk and fresh eggs delivered from Gibralter as you go through the Straits. Like the black whale that follows you while you call it a black whale and knowing all the while that it's a snout-nosed submarine that might come up one night and pour shells onto the deck. Like the plane that whips from behind the mountain on the shores of French Morrocco just a few miles beyond the Straits, skims low over the water, drops a fat, long egg that you watch. It skims across the calm Mediterranean and you wait for it to plop against the side of the ship

while you only stare at it because that's all that can be done. The ship moves along. The long egg follows it, hits and then there's fire and screams and burns and hurts and death and the stars and the moon fall into the brightly lit ocean so that there is only blackness and fire. Only black and red and screams. Some are hurt badly. Some not so badly. A few not at all. Sometimes those not hurt are hurt most because they watch and help the others. But no one is helped forever. And so down from the crow's nest you come because no one would climb up after you and once you almost fall as you take an arm from the ladder to try to chase the flies away that follow the warm blood that washes down from where the pain is low in your stomach... and there's something you remember about a captain, but you can't remember what that something is or was; you'll never know what it is, what it was. It's gone, but it's still there somehow.

"Brad?"

Nat's voice snapped the past away and Brad turned to him and to the present. "What?"

"Thought if you were going to skip chow I'd bring up a sandwich for you. Be back in a second." And he was gone.

Brad started to call him back. But he was gone. He sat up to eat the sandwich. The binoculars fell but he caught them before they hit the steel deck. He put them back and suddenly threw the sandwich overboard...

Tomorrow he would have liberty. A chance to get into town and see how things might have changed. He lay on his back again and looked at the sky. This time without the binoculars. How many times had he been here

before...two? Three? He could remember the dark streets running downhill into the sea. And the natives who begged for fresh fruit. Children following him along the streets while he juggled the two oranges he would trade for a bottle of wine. Their eyes followed him. Had it been the eyes, following him, that bothered him so much that he would toss the fruit their way and drink beer?

Then it was over as suddenly as it had begun. Home. Best girl. College. New car for a graduation present.

And now, where am I? Back to where I never wanted to go to once. Not ever. Now I come back.

"What'cha want to do, Townsend?" someone had asked him halfway across the Atlantic when they had drifted for a week waiting for machine parts to be flown to them. "See the sights or sumpin'?"

He hadn't answered. It wasn't long before the crew knew something about him: that he didn't talk--he didn't answer.

"I don't know what the hell's the matter with him," Brad overheard an oiler say one day.

"Who?" asked his companion. It was Cosetti.

"Townsend. You know. The skinny guy who reads all the time and never says nothing."

"Yeah. That guy."

"Like I say. I don't understand why he don't talk to nobody."

"Yeah. He works though. Did'ja see him loading stores before we left?"

"Sure. Like you say, he works. Don't know how he lifted those damned hundred-pound flour sacks. But he sure don't open his trap."

Sometimes Brad wondered the same thing--about the flour sacks.

He usually read when he was off duty. Once in a great while someone would ask him if he could read one of the books he kept stored in his locker. He always let whoever it was take one knowing it would usually be returned unread. "Aint'cha got nothing by Spillane?" Cosetti might ask. Brad didn't.

One day at breakfast, Nat had asked Brad if Eliot had not used Augustinian references in some of his poems. Brad was surprised and that night they talked a long time about "Wasteland." They talked often after that. But Nat always seemed to know when to talk and when it was time to stop.

Once he had asked Brad why he had come back to sea.

"When I find out I'll let you know," Brad had answered in the same tone as if he had said, "I'll let you know if it rains tomorrow." Nat never asked again.

Next day Brad stood near the gangway and watched while some of the crew walked down the ladder and settled themselves in the liberty boat.

Someone yelled up from the boat to ask him where the nearest bar was. He told him he wouldn't have to walk far to find it. Others had asked him earlier if they could go along with him since he knew the town. He was about to say "No," but Nat quickly told them that he and Brad were going together and gave them the three's a crowd routine.

Now, Nat yelled to him to come on. They were almost ready to shove off.

Brad did not answer. He raised his elbows from the gunnel and looked up and around the hills. He thought for a second that the view reminded him of the way a person stares at a looking glass and sees only one part of his head. Twist as you might, all of the head is never seen at the same time. Oran is like that, he thought. You can only see it in sections.

I wonder if anything has changed. Anything at all. He finished his smoke, pushed the cigarette between his fingers and thumb and snapped it across the water. He watched the water choke it out. The tide was moving out to sea and rotten pieces of timber along with pieces of paper and the remains of garbage were following it along. Brad looked down and saw two large watermelon rinds that were rancid. They floated along with their green backs on the water with the flies swirling about, above and on it.

For a minute he thought he would go back to the compartment and sleep.

The rinds caught in an eddy near the anchor chain and stayed there. The flies were so large that Brad could see them from where he stood, practically at midships. He swished his tongue around his mouth once or twice and spit between his teeth, just missing a white hat sitting on the head of one of the men in the whaleboat.

"Hell," he said and walked down the ladder into the boat.

"What'cha say, Townsend?" asked the bosun.

"Nothing. Just the God-damn flies. I don't like flies."

They landed and the crew hesitated before dropping behind and

following Brad's deliberate walk up the winding stairs with Nat just behind him. They reached the top in about ten minutes. Still silent, Brad walked on ahead. He remembered some of the houses along the street. There was the one painted candy striped, only the red had turned to pink and it was gray now where once it had been white.

People were walking along their way to market and the streets were busy with wagons and mule-drawn carts. He walked on.

Sure I've been here before, he thought. He bumped into an old lady who was carrying a basket and said he was sorry. He helped her put the dirty laundry back in the basket.

Then they walked on toward the town.

"Gum-gum, Joe?"

"Go to hell," Brad shot at the boy who had crossed the street to intercept them.

"What's he want?"

"What the hell you think he wants? The latest racing results or a report from Truman? Gum. Candy. Anything."

Brad said no more, but turned away from Nat just long enough to throw the boy a coin. The boy picked up the money and ran past them into a doorway from where he yelled at Nat, "No good son of a beech."

Brad laughed while Nat stopped in amazement. "Why he's not more than four or five," Nat was saying. "He couldn't be any older."

The other crew members had threaded away to different streets by now and they were alone. Now that they had climbed so high they waited for a moment so that they could rest.

Nat walked across the street to ask someone for a match. Brad

looked down at the bay while he waited. It seemed to be far away. On board ship the water was stained and polluted, but now, just an hour later and hundreds of feet higher, the water was a mixture of beautiful soft greens and blues rather than the harsh darkness of scum he had seen from the ship. The Mediterranean. The ships lay in the harbor as though they were small boats with bows pointing oceanward and sterns toward the city. Funny. It was all different, even when it was still the same. Same water, ships. Same captain. Plane. Whale. Fire. Flies. Different how? The same? Why? White gowned Arabs became filthy Arabs. White sheets draped over filth, ugly sores, scabs. Oran. Dirt. Filth. Scum. And he was back again.

I won't see her, he thought. I won't see her. Her body, her face, most of all her face, blocked out for the time being the captain, the plane, the whale, the fire and the flies. She can't be here and even if she is I still won't see her. Eight years. For just one night and ever since then it's never been the same.

Nat had come back. They walked again. Nat had difficulty in keeping up with him, but perhaps he knew better than to ask him to slow down, Brad thought distractedly. They moved faster and faster through the town, down the narrow streets, past the dirty children who begged and screamed. Finally he crossed over into a park where he sat down under a large shade tree. He closed his eyes.

"Nat."

"What?"

"There's a bar just across the street. Joe's Joint. See it?"

"Yeah. The one with the beer garden outside?"

"Right. Go get some beer and bring it on over here, will you?"

"Sure. But why can't we go over there?"

"I---. Bring me some and then you can stay over there if you want to."

Brad lay there and listened to guttural sounds the natives made as they passed. The clouds moved across the sky and he could see them through the openings in the branches of the trees. No balloons. Once there had been balloons. Once he had been on board a ship. The ship had stood off shore and blasted the very hell out of this city. Later, he had come back and when he saw how things were he never told anyone that he had helped to make it the way it was. He had drunk his beer across the street from the park at Joe's Joint out of dented tin cans. Hot beer from a special recipe which the sign said was the closest thing to Milwaukee beer in North Africa. It didn't taste too much like beer but because the sign said it was the closest thing to Milwaukee beer there was, it had tasted good and sometimes if he tried hard enough he could get drunk from it. Good and drunk. He had become very drunk and he had gone home with her. The only time.

Later--now was later--he had come back to the city, because it had never been the same. But he would not look for her because there were no more balloons in the sky and he hadn't been drunk since. But because he had been drunk he had gone with her, following her a half block back, with the boys from the ship pushing him on until she turned in to the squalid shack with no door and beckoned for him to come in. He had--the boys had left. The next day aboard ship no one spoke of it. In fact no one ever spoke of it again, but since then he had never been the same

and now he was back and he was afraid to look for her because there were no more balloons in the sky and he hadn't been drunk since. He had been sitting there listening to the makeshift band squeezing out sour notes which were supposed to be American music. After many beers they had sounded much better and so he had gone up to the bandstand and played trumpet for two hours and many more customers came. Free beers kept coming up to the bandstand as the dark-skinned waiters hurried back and forth. He was playing a solo of "How High the Moon" when he saw her. They had been riffing the same number for over twenty minutes and the khakis and whites were beating feet fast and hard against the floor and the tin cans against the table. The noise from the band became louder and his solo was shrieking through the city streets. People were cluttering the sidewalks next to the open air beer garden and somebody who must have been Joe was trying to sell them Milwaukee beer. He had just finished the "dah-da-dah-da-dah" passage and was about to screech high on the final note before his own sweat could drown him. Then he saw her. He missed the note because the trumpet had left his mouth and his arms hung by his sides while he stared at her. She beckoned to him and because he was very drunk he had walked across the floor bumping into tables and soldiers and sailors and they had laughed and pushed him toward her. She put out her hand and said something between her teeth that didn't come out the way it was meant to be. Through the haze that fell over him he saw a piece of cloth strapped to her back with a short, squat, brown head sticking out from the cloth. A baby. He looked at what had called him from the bandstand and saw the scaly brown skin with the open sores on the arms and face. Because there were no

teeth the mouth looked all red next to the brownness. The hair was festered with more scales and the eyes shrunk up into evil-looking slits with wrinkles along the sides.

But worse than what she was was what he saw when he tried again to see.

In the middle of her face, between the slits that were eyes and the red that was mouth was nothing except a large black hole. The creature had no nose and so he stared into this black hole until she looked up at him and, taking his hand, brought it up in front of her face and held it there. For a moment there was only quiet and he was not so drunk that he didn't want somebody to stop what was happening. He watched her take his finger and raise it toward her face. Slowly she moved it closer until it was near where the nose had been. She pressed his finger into the gaping hole and kept her eyes on his while he felt the inside of her face until he was sick. He turned from the filth he had made on the sidewalk and walked back inside where he sat and drank more beer. He played no more music. He sat. Alone. She waited. When he had finished he walked toward her. Walked just behind her, saying nothing. Walked home with her while his shipmates walked behind--some of them yelling words he could not understand. Walked with her into the stinking hole that was a room and after that there was nothing that was clean or good for him. Since then he had never been the same and now he was back and he was afraid to look for her because there were no more balloons in the sky and he hadn't been drunk

since.

"Nat?"

"What?"

"I'm drunk. At least I think so. Am I?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"You drunk too, Nat?"

"No. I don't guess so."

"That's good, 'cause there's something I got to tell you."

"What?"

"Nothin', I guess. Just wanted to thank you for looking out for me. That's all."

"Okay. Tell me."

"I just now did, didn't I?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Nat?"

"Hmmn?"

"She's gone now? I can cross the street?"

"Sure. You can cross. Might as well. You got to cross sometime."

"Did I tell you about the watermelon rinds and the flies sucking up that crap? No? But you didn't see the flies, did you? Wonder if the slimy bastards will be there when we go back?"

"Don't know. Why not forget it?"

"Can't forget. Sometimes, can't remember. But don't ever trust flies, Nat. They're bad. All bad. Let's go 'cross the street. Maybe they still have a horn I can mess with. Maybe it'll be different now.

I have to find out how to lose all this so I can find the rest."

When they lurched away they left the beer cans scattered across the clean, green grass and far below them the tide was moving out to sea and Joe's Joint was between it all.

WASH YOUR SOUL, MY SON

The cars moving toward him seemed to slip down into the long valley as they came over the hill. Brad Townsend walked along the side of the road, stepping off onto the brick-colored clay shoulders each time a car passed by. He would move the heavy suitcase he carried over to his left hand and wave his right thumb at the faceless drivers behind the wheels. No luck.

"...Sound horn, bay horn, loud horn, race horn..." The refrain kept jingling around in his head while he tried to remember where he had heard it before. The cars continued to go by. Sometimes a wave from the driver. Usually a blast of noise from a horn.

It was still early morning. Eight-ten, his watch said. But he had been on the highway since before six. Not doing too well, he thought, as he put down his bag and sat on top of it. Not much progress.

When he had rested he picked the bag up and walked on. An oil truck chugged by, leaving fumes hanging in the sunlight. To his right was a small, box-like house, the only house in sight. Far down the road he could see green, yellow and red flickers of light taking pin-point turns at making colors above the long strip of asphalt. An intersection, he thought. Perhaps a better chance for a ride.

Because there was no one near, he began to sing. Softly at first. Then loud. The sound of his voice seemed large in the still-grey Georgia morning. A light frost lay along the farmlands which banked the road.

His hand, only the left one holding his suitcase, because the other was bundled inside his pocket, was cold. The land seemed empty now that

the house was behind him. Now and then a car would break through the stillness and speed past him.

Experience. It's like that, he thought. Like a car. It stays far behind before it slips up beside you and then, suddenly, it's gone. Not always, he contradicted himself. Sometimes it's never forgotten. Sometimes it stays forever.

He reached the traffic signal and wondered why it had been placed there. There was no other intersecting highway, only a narrow rusty-looking road. Brad looked at it. No tire tracks in the soft mud.

The light facing the highway turned red. He watched. Then green. Then, briefly, yellow. Red--Green--Yellow. The colors tumbled into each other and fused with the sound of engines that slowed or stopped or sped on. This is now, he thought. The colors clicked as they kept turning over in their three-eyed face.

"Thanks," Brad said.

The preacher let him out by a combination gas station, beer parlor and dance hall and Brad climbed over the seat and got out of the car by opening the back door just behind the driver's position. "Don't neither of these front doors work," the preacher had said when Brad got in. "Plays the devil with the womenfolk if they insists on riding up front."

Brad got his suitcase out of the trunk. The preacher waved good-bye; the tail-lights on the car became smaller and smaller and the skip-noise the motor had made for the last dozen miles of the ride was gone and lost.

Brad pushed open the door of the cafe. He put down the bag. Six or seven men in dungarees were sitting in the booths. He thought he could feel them talking about him. He wasn't sure, but what he felt made him think that they might be.

"Hamburger, please," he said to the fat, greasy man with a wart on the side of his nose who was behind the counter and who drew a cup of coffee without asking. He slammed it down.

In the mirror which ran the counter's length Brad could see one of the men talking to a woman and both turned to stare at the back of his head, so that he caught their eyes. He looked quickly around and saw no other women in the place.

"Gas 'er up, Buddy?" It was the counterman.

"No. No car. I'm hitch hiking."

"Where from?" The hamburger was ready and Brad wished that the man would stop scratching the wart long enough to give the sandwich to him. He was hungry.

"Chapel Hill," he said.

"Where's that?"

"North Carolina."

The fat man slapped some mustard on the roll and shoved it toward Brad. The grease and watered-down mustard were leaking through the crust. Oh, well, he was hungry...

"Where am I now?" he asked.

"Casino gas station."

"I mean, what town? I caught a ride this far and the preacher who picked me up said it was near where I'm going."

The jukebox was moaning; the voice on the record was singing something about being married by the Bible and divorced by the law.

"Where you going?"

Brad started. To the monastery which is somewhere near Conyers. No. That wouldn't do. It might begin conversation and he didn't feel like conversation. So he only said, "Conyers."

He had told no one at school where he had decided to spend Christmas vacation. His thesis for his Master's was in the hands of the committee and he would be ready for his orals when he returned. That was enough. He had been restless, impatient. He knew the thesis was no damned good. He didn't give a damn about Swift or Stella.

It had been at dinner one night. Red Jennings (he had black, kinky hair and Brad never did understand the nickname) had been kidding him about a poker game set for later that same evening. Brad said he would not be able to make it.

"Why not?"

"Just can't," Brad had said, or something like that.

"Hell, Brad. You don't have any more to do than I do. Let yourself go one time. The boys are beginning to think you're a freak, the way you keep to yourself."

"Sorry, Red. Some other time. Thanks anyway."

"Okay. Maybe you ought to join a monastery."

"Maybe I will."

Later in his room, he tried to explain it to himself. Why he had suddenly gripped the bench. Why he felt his heart jump and his stomach get excited. The scornfully-put suggestion opened up one more door. He

spent the next month arguing with himself, wondering if that could be the answer. The final resolution. It was one night when he was passing St. Andrew's Church; it was raining, he remembered. Everything else had failed. This could, this might, help. He would try.

"So Conyers is where you're going," the counterman said, drawing Brad back with his wart-scratching.

"That's right," Brad said. "Conyers is the place."

"Kin-folks there?"

Damn this fellow, Brad thought. But it was getting late and he wanted to catch a ride to Conyers, to the monastery, didn't he?

"No," he said, "no relatives." He looked around the room for a clock. "What time is it?"

"Few minutes to twelve."

Brad wished that he would blow his cigar smoke in another direction. "Any chance of my catching a ride or a taxi over to Conyers?" he asked.

"Hell, mister, we ain't got no taxi service around here. Maybe one of the boys will be going down the road a piece. Might somebody give you a lift."

"I'll pay. Could you ask them?"

Brad watched in the mirror as the man moved from booth to booth. A side-to-side shake of the head seemed to be the answer he was getting until he stopped in front of the man and woman Brad had first noticed. The man was sallow-faced and had holes in the knees of his faded dungarees. The woman was sitting with her feet resting on the opposite seat. The man got up from the booth and came over.

"So you're looking for a ride," he said.

"That's right," Brad said. "To Conyers. I'm stuck and want to get there tonight. How far is it?"

"Eight miles, maybe. Is it worth a fin?"

"I guess it'll have to be," Brad said. He didn't have much money, but he wouldn't be needing any, not where he was going.

"Where you going in Conyers?"

He would tell him now and get it over with. "To the monastery," he said.

"Monastery? Oh, you mean the spook-house." He looked Brad up and down. "Well, now. Don't know as I can take you up there," he drawled. "Tell you what. I'll go talk it over with Sammie Jo."

He walked back to the booth and leaned over the woman. There was loud, carrying laughter. She appeared to Brad to be older than the man. The man kept waving four fingers and a thumb in front of her face. So, Brad thought, the joke goes on. The woman stood up and walked over to him.

"J. D. says you wants to go up to the spook-house," she said with a grin.

"Yes," he said, holding himself in. "I'd like to get started."

"Why?"

"Well, they aren't expecting me and I..."

"You ain't one of them, are you? Or are you?" She grinned.

"No..." he said, and added, "Ma'm," because he thought it might help him get the damned ride.

She called to the man. "Might as well take him, J. D. Five bucks will buy a lot of beer. Ain't gonna hurt nothing just carrying

him up there."

Rude laughter. Everybody entered in.

Brad paid for his sandwich, picked up his bag and followed J. D. and Sammie Jo out to where the car was parked. They got in--Brad in the back. Finally J. D. was able to start the motor and they moved out across the highway until they came to a dirt road. The December moon hung below the clouds and lit up both sides of the road. Brad could see the tall pine trees silhouetted against the sky. J. D. kept an arm around Sammie Jo and now and then there were guffaws and giggles. After a mile or so, they became sociable. They seemed to feel it was their duty to tell him about the monastery. It had opened a year ago, they said.

"Land belonged to Ab Fairchild," J. D. said. "Heard he sold it but none of us here in the valley had any idea then who bought it. Next thing we know, all these funny-looking fellers, about two dozen, popped up one day and moved into the old barn."

"Tell him how they was dressed, J. D."

"Dressed? Hell, they looked like they was wearing dresses. Long, brown sacks that covered them all over and a hood over their head. Funny looking."

"Tell him about the niggers, J. D."

Brad studied the moon and the tree shadows.

"Well," J. D. said, "these-here spooks comes traipsing in with these funny sacks all over them and these hoods, and by damn if the niggers here in the valley don't go plumb loco. None of 'em went to work for three, four days and we was all wondering what the hell happened."

"Tell him what happened, J. D.," said Sammie Jo.

"Well, damn if the niggers didn't think they was some new kind of Ku Kluxers and they had the fire scared out of 'em. Got all straightened out, though."

"How come they dress that way?" Sammie Jo asked. "Ain't they got no other clothes?"

Brad couldn't stand it anymore. "They gave up everything they ever owned when they joined the Trappists," he said, surprised at the strain in his voice.

"The what?" J. D. asked.

"Trappists."

"Hmmn," said Sammie Jo.

"Well, what do they do?" J. D. wanted to know.

"Pray," Brad said.

"Pray?"

"That's right."

"I seen one close up one time," J. D. said. "One of 'em drives a truck into town once in awhile. I guess, to get stuff they need. He usually passes by the Casino and don't never wave back when we holler at him. Once he ran out of gas down near the station and flagged me down when I was passing. I took..."

"Tell him how scared you was to stop, honey," Sammie Jo interrupted.

"Wasn't no such thing. Just in a hurry. Like I said, I stopped there and he didn't have no money, so Happy told him to use the telephone and have some of his buddies come after him. Know what he said?"

"No," Brad said.

"Told us they didn't have no telephone on the hill and even if they did have one, he didn't know how to use it."

"Ain't that the damndest thing you ever heard?" asked Sammie Jo. "Drove the truck, though."

"How much longer before we get there?" Brad asked.

"Not much," said J. D. "It's just around the bend."

"Gonna stay long?" Sammie Jo asked. "Ain't no women there, you know." Giggles and guffaws filled the car.

"Yes, I know," Brad told her.

"Now, how they get along without no women, you reckon?"

"Oh, I don't imagine it bothers them," Brad answered J. D.

"Well," said J. D., "there it is."

They swung off the dirt road onto a stone pathway, barely wide enough for the car. Trees lined the top of the hill and the quietness emphasized the desertedness.

"Where?" said Brad, sitting up. "I don't see anything."

They had reached the top of the hill.

"There," said J. D.

Brad looked but saw only two small wooden-frame buildings. "Are you sure this is the place?" he asked.

"Course, I'm sure," J. D. answered. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just doesn't look like what I expected." Pictures in the books he had been reading on monastic life showed the early Gothic influence on Trappist communities at Gethsemani in Kentucky and Providence in Rhode Island.

"That's where they lived when they first came." J. D. was pointing to the smaller of the buildings that was trimmed with moonlight. "That's the barn. That other one over there, they built themselves."

Brad noticed a small wall that ran along the road enclosing the two buildings.

"That-there wall's so none of 'em can get out," said Sammie Jo.

The wall was just barely eight feet high and would not require too much effort to climb, Brad thought.

J. D. pulled up near a closed gate. "This must be where you go in," he said.

Brad opened his wallet and counted out five one-dollar bills. He handed them to J. D. as he stepped from the car. He saw J. D. pass two of them over to Sammie Jo who tucked them down the front of her dress.

"Thanks," J. D. said.

"Send word down to the Casino and I'll fix you up." J. D. shifted gears.

"Cut the motor off, honey," Brad heard Sammie Jo say. "If we're gonna park, why don't we do it here?"

"Good idear," snickered J. D.

The cutting off of the engine made for an immense stillness. The moon was very bright. For a moment Brad stood by, helpless.

"Waitin' for something?" J. D. asked.

Brad turned away and walked toward the gate. When he was close to the wall he could see only the top of the white building, just the roof.

He pulled at a small bell that he found set in the gate. It made a thin noise that reminded him of a spoon tapped against a half-full water glass. Nothing happened. He noticed a window built into the wall. He pushed away some ivy and was looking into a dimly lit room. The light was shed by a single candle that was placed on the floor near the center of the room. Kneeling, face toward the window into which Brad was peering, was a man. A priest? Brad wondered. He watched through the window for a few minutes before he rang the bell again. When the man did not move from his prayer-position, he tapped at the window. Softly. No notice. Loudly, the next time. The man raised his head and Brad waited for him to show some surprise. Instead, he put a finger up, as though to say, "Wait," and disappeared from Brad's sight. He turned back to the gate, glancing over his shoulder toward the car. "'Birth and copulation and death'," he thought. A fine time to be quoting Eliot. Damn J. D. and damn Sammie Jo. And damned if the car's headlights didn't come on at the exact same moment that the gate cracked open. (So they were through?)

Brad hoped to say something to the short figure who was standing before him, but could think of nothing.

"Are you expected?" It was a high, small voice. Like the sound the bell had made.

"No," he said. "But I would like to stay with you for a few days, Father, if I may."

"Brother," the man said.

"Brother?"

"Yes. I am Brother Anthony. Not all of us have been called by

the Lord for the priesthood. Guests here usually call me Brother Gatekeeper."

A brown cowl was pulled up over his head and shrouded most of his face. The shadows from the wall, along with the light from the moon and the car, made him an eerie figure as he stood there. Brad could hear Sammie Jo loudly pleading with J. D. to leave. "Dammit, J. D., look at the spook. Let's get the hell outa here."

"Do you have room for me?" Brad asked. "Could I stay?"

"Of course," came the answer. "Your friends?" He nodded toward the car.

"They--uh--they just gave me a lift. They won't be staying," Brad said.

J. D. had turned the car around. "See you in the funny papers," he called out. Brad winced but then thought that it might have been worse if he had said, "See you in church." The monk did not seem to have heard it. He turned and walked through the gate. Brad followed. They walked toward the larger building--the two-story one that J. D. had said the monks built. It reminded Brad of the two-story building he had spent sixteen weeks in while he was in boot camp after he first joined the Navy. Same design. Military looking. Two stories high and plenty long.

The yard seemed almost empty. There were no trees. But centered in the yard, directly in front of the door of the house they were walking toward, was a tall marble statue that caught the glow of moonlight. The monk must have seen Brad looking toward it because he changed his direction. "Our Blessed Virgin," he said to Brad, when they

were standing in front of it. "Our Lady of the Holy Ghost who is our patron here," he went on.

Various old obscenities formed in Brad's mind but faded as he stared into the stone eyes. Eyes had always bothered him. "Townsend," some damned captain of some damned ship had said, "can't you learn to look a man in the eyes when you're talking to him?" Stone eyes were all right, Brad thought. They are not like the eyes of the dead. They weren't bothering him. The monk picked up the bag. "Come," he said. "It is getting late."

He pushed the front door open. "It is never locked," he told Brad.

Holy pictures lined the downstairs hallway and when they mounted the stairs Brad looked up to see a huge crucifix staring down at him. A shaft of moonlight had slipped in through the stained glass window and the face of Christ looked blue and hurt.

Halfway up the stairs Brad stopped and looked up into the eyes. I feel all right, he thought.

The monk made the Sign of the Cross, then glanced back over his shoulder. Brad did the same.

"You're Catholic, then?" the monk asked.

"Yes."

"I'll tell Frater Peter," the monk said. "He's the guestmaster. Will you want to go to Confession and Communion in the morning?"

"Yes," Brad said. If he had come here, then that was the right answer.

They walked down a narrow corridor lined with doors that were

numbered and closed like hotel-room doors. "Here's where you may stay," the monk said, stopping in front of one that looked like all the others. He switched on the light. "Sleep well. Goodnight."

He was gone before Brad could ask him where the bathroom was, for God's sakes.

Nothing much in the room: Bed, desk, straight-backed chair and a bureau, that was all, except for another crucifix, a smaller one, on the wall above the bed. He undressed. This is it, he thought. You went halfway around the world to look for a whore in Oran and here you are. Naked, he looked down once at his belly scars. You won a war and now here you are. Peace, boy, is what you're looking for. It had been a long trip.

The eyes of Mary and Christ soothed him, boy. They were the eyes, all right. He turned off the light, pulled back the covers and got in. "Hail Mary full of Grace," he immediately muttered and was surprised that he didn't stumble over any of it as he said it through. So he said it again. He lay there saying more. Moonlight was caught in a long-lined crack in the dusty window shade and made funny patterns on the wall. The shadows, the white-yellow colors splashed around the cricifix which was like a neon sign, he thought, only safer.

He slept. There were no brown-robed monks in his dreams. No Sammie Jo's or Happy's or J. D.'s, no shells bursting and no screams. No captain was telling him that he was yellow. He stood in the rain and watched a black box being lowered into the ground and handled the broken picture of his mother.

But he was awake. Belly wound, boy. BELLY WOUND. A mere glimpse

of the medic who said that, neither nose nor eyes nor face. Take your hands away, it's your belly, boy. And it's okay, boy. It's there. Look at it. Touch it. Call it what it is, boy, and you'll know it's there. Never mind Freud's umbrella. Touch it, boy. See, it's okay.

No bathroom. He got up, opened the window and hoped they wouldn't hear.

"Are you awake, my son?"

Brad struggled for a moment to free his arm that was wedged beneath his body.

"If you'll dress now, I can hear your Confession and you may go to Communion," the voice continued.

Brad looked up but could see no face. The voice emanated out of thick white folds. "I'm Father Peter. I'm in charge of the guests."

Brad scratched the sleep from his eyes and stood up. You didn't salute, you got dressed. You went down the hall, found the bathroom and came back for Confession...

He knelt on the rugless floor while the priest sat stiffly on the bed in his long, white cloak. He held the large cross that dangled from his belt in front of Brad and the eyes on it pleased Brad.

"Wash your soul, my son. Begin."

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned," he said. "It has been about seven years since I..."

"How long?"

"Since the war, Father, I think. Maybe longer."

"I see. Go on."

Brad went on. He had had some evil thoughts, he said. (He had eaten meat on Friday. He had wanted Sammie Jo in his sleep . . . . .)

"Is that all?" Father Peter asked.

"Yes, Father. I believe so."

"Good. You have nothing to worry about. Try to get to Confession more often, for we all need the Sacraments. Now, make a good Act of Contrition. Say three Hail Marys and one Our Father."

It slurred along: "OhmyGodIamheartilysorryforallmysins...."

Father Peter raised his right hand high to make the Sign of the Cross and grant absolution. Silence followed. Brad rose from his knees and brushed off his pants.

"The priests are saying their Masses. If you want to go to Communion..."

"All right, Father," he said.

"Follow me, then."

They left the room. Down the stairs and through an open arch. A turn to the left and through an open door and they were in the chapel.

"Excuse me now," said Father Peter. "I shall see you at breakfast."

Brad dipped down on one knee to genuflect and then, when in the pew, dropped to both knees to begin his prayers. (Safe enough.) He lifted his head after his Hail Marys and Our Father to look down on the chapel from where he sat in the balcony.

Mass was beginning on the main altar. Men in brown and white were drifting into the chapel from the many side doors along the length of the room. The brown-clothed ones came to the back where they knelt much the

same as he was doing. But the ones in white stayed close to the altar forming double lines and facing each other. They began to chant.

The solemn Gregorian chant drifted through the morning and set a mood. The Gospel was being read and the priest stood to the left of the altar while the chant went on. Brad felt increasingly soothed. Mass continued.

When it came time for Communion, Brad left the balcony and went downstairs and through the main door of the chapel. He kept going until he reached the altar rail. The music continued. Soft but powerful. Moody stuff. Contemplative--with a worldly quality of another world. The men in front of Brad were kneeling one by one to receive Holy Communion. Brad knelt. The priest moved nearer to him. He was waiting for him. Brad raised his head, pointed his tongue out and closed his eyes while the Host was placed in his mouth. OhmyGod.....He was walking back down the aisle with his hands clasped tight in front of him holding onto a rosary.

A tap on the shoulder. It was Father Peter.

"Your breakfast should be ready now. I want you to meet our other guests."

They walked out of the chapel and down the stairs. Brad thought he smelled bacon and eggs and said so.

"You're correct," said Father Peter.

"But I thought the monks ate no meat or fish or even fowl," Brad said. "I thought you just ate cheese and bread."

"We do," Father Peter said. "But that's not the diet we serve

our guests."

Two men, both in black cassocks, were standing behind their chairs when Brad and Father Peter walked into the dining room. One, with glasses, kept his mouth moving and Brad looked down at his plate to see where a large piece was gone from his slice of toast.

"Father Maurice," Father Peter said, nodding toward him, "this is Brad Townsend who has come to visit with us."

They shook hands. Then he was introduced to the other priest, Father Ryan, who nodded. Father Peter excused himself: he would go into the refectory for his breakfast, he said.

"Say Grace, Father?" said Father Ryan to Father Maurice.

"Au nom du Pere, et du Fils et du Saint-Esprit," Father Maurice said, crossing himself.

They sat down.

Brad ate his bacon and eggs -- bacon and eggs, bread and cheese, it was all the same to him, maybe. Father Maurice used his fork only for his scrambled eggs. He lifted the bacon to his mouth and pushed it down. Once when he had his head close to his plate Father Ryan gave Brad a quick look. Almost, the old boy winked. (Excuse the bad manners, please.)

It was no surprise that Father Maurice finished first. But he waited until the other two were through and picked up the bread crusts from their plates. These he wrapped in his handkerchief. He left.

"Well, Father," Brad said. "What do we do now?"

"Father Peter has suggested that you might take a walk with me,"

Father Ryan said.

They were walking. Brad had forgotten how early it must be until he noticed that the sun had not climbed all the way up over the hills that surrounded the monastery. They walked along a thin-looking brook for awhile, crossed to the other side and headed toward a patch of woods. They talked as they went along. Father Ryan comfortable now with a sweater pulled over his shirt. He was not wearing his Roman collar.

Brad learned that Father Ryan had a parish in Texas. He did not learn why he had come here to Georgia. Maybe he needed a vacation. Without his Roman collar he was full of beans. He couldn't wait to tell Brad about Father Maurice.

"He's sick," he said. "Be careful of him."

"Why?"

"Well, he's French. He speaks very little English--he's moody. You saw that, I guess."

"And is he visiting here, too?"

"So Father Peter tells me. But he's been here about a year and he's not able to do any work. Sick. Did you see how he took the bread with him?"

"Yes."

"Well, he has a pet he keeps in his room. Before you ask, I'll tell you what it is. A fly."

Father Ryan shook with laughter. That's all right, Brad thought, laugh. I made a flag for a soldier, one time.

They must have been walking for fifteen minutes when Brad noticed

some of the men in brown out in a field. They had plows but only one had a mule to pull it. They stopped their work, waved and smiled at Father Ryan and him. One was gesturing violently with his arms and his fingers travelled rapidly along his face and chest. Father Ryan laughed heartily.

"He wants to know if you like football," he said to Brad.

Brad nodded. The monk began again.

"Now he wants to know if Notre Dame beat Army?"

"They didn't play each other this year," Brad said.

The monk hurried off to another group to make signs to them; obviously he was relaying the news.

"Don't they ever talk, Father?" Brad asked.

"Very rarely," Father Ryan said. "They like it better this way."

It's a good way, by God, Brad thought. It's the best way. Not to have to hear the sound of the human voice. Not to have to hear your own. From Here to Eternity. He smiled a sudden, secret smile.

Father Ryan was looking at him curiously. "You're in college, aren't you?" he said.

"Graduate school," Brad said. "Yes."

"So? But you're thinking of...staying here?"

"Taking the orders, do you mean?" Brad laughed. "I may."

"I'll pray for you while you are here," Father Ryan said.

"Thank you, Father," Brad said. "Thank you very much."

The church bell rang out across the fields. The monks left their plows.

"Shall we go back?"

"What now?" Brad asked.

"Morning devotions," Father Ryan said.

"Prayers," Brad said. "Is it the order of the day--praying?"

"Most of the time," Father Ryan said. "Prayer--contemplation--work."

"And no responsibility," Brad said.

"None but to God."

"Let's go to morning devotions," Brad said.

The chapel again, the chanting again. The altar was very plain. The benches, stiff and pious, like the monks who were sitting on them. The stained glass window above the altar occupied almost the whole end of the church. The figure of Mary was drawn into it. Hands outstretched, she seemed to be beckoning to Brad to come closer to her. Brad examined the nose first (it was there) and then the eyes. The sun shone through the painted folds of her dress, blue, and her fair skin scattered colors all over the chapel. The colors were very pure.

Brad fingered his rosary. (I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of Heaven and...) The monks took up the chant again. He saw Father Maurice off in a corner and thought he might be crying. The priest turned his head away when he looked to see. Father Ryan read his Missal. The chant went back and forth. Every now and then one of the white figures would slip to the ground, bow his head toward the altar while striking his breast, and then rise again... The service was over.

"What would you like to do, now, my son?" Father Peter asked Brad.

"Whatever...is done," Brad said.

"Go to your room, then, my son, and contemplate."

Brad went to his room and sat on the bed.

At noon there was the Angelus and it was time for church again. There were services again at four and Brad wondered why the white-hooded figures took turns at kneeling toward the altar while singing until he saw one who struck his breast say, "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxim culpa."

"You don't have to feel that you're required to attend these services," Father Peter said. It was a voice speaking from pure white robes and it did not matter where it came from.

"I want to attend the services," Brad said quietly. "All of them."

Evening vespers and the chanting of Benediction. Brad thought it was over. Then he noticed that the lights were gradually dimming until the chapel looked like an empty room. A figure appeared on the altar and touched a match to long candles which stood at either side. The light was large enough to bring the white figures near the front into view. The brown-clothed men in the rear were still lost in darkness. But a low, almost silent, humming began from the rear. The brothers singing, not chanting. He remembered now. Father Ryan had told him to listen for this; the only time the brothers sang with those of the religious choir. Now, his eyes had grown accustomed to the greyness and the window of Mary took shape as he stared, trying to look through the woman.

Salve Regina. The voices kept their prayer low and personal. For

a moment Brad felt that it belonged only to them and that he was a fraud and could not share it with them. But his head was bowed, touching the pew in front of him. He raised his head. The murmuring prayer continued. Near the top of the window of Mary a light came that helped the picture-cloud glow. Then, while Brad watched, a slip of the light crept (so slowly he knew no one else saw it) across the long glass. Not straight across, but dipping, slipping; once, he thought, turning back. And then it was where he knew it was meant to go. Inside, behind the face of Mary. The white light hung there for a long time until Brad wondered what was holding it. Then, faster than it had come, it went. He took a deep breath and wiped his palms against his pants. The singing had stopped. When? Everyone else was gone. Everyone else was...What was it Father Peter had said? "Wash your soul, my son." The sense of holiness and peace settled softly around him. He did not rise from his knees. He would stay on here forever. He had found it, at last--peace. Ite Missa est.